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<b>Operation Wellhit (Battle of Boulogne)</b>	
September 17–22, 1944 - Boulogne-sur-Mer, France	
Belligerents	
 Canada	 Germany
 United Kingdom	
Commanders and leaders	
 MG Daniel Spry 	 GenLt Ferdinand Heim
Strength	
3d Canadian Infantry Division <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 2 infantry brigades</li> <li>• supporting armour, artillery and aircraft</li> </ul>	10,000
Casualties and losses	
600 killed or wounded	c. 500 killed or wounded 9,500 captured

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## Operation Wellhit

**Operation Wellhit** was the Second World War operation by the 3rd Canadian Division (Canadian 1<sup>st</sup> Army ) to take the fortified port of Boulogne in Northern France.

17<sup>th</sup> – 22<sup>nd</sup> September 1944

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## Personal Story

**Extract from AWM 64  
OPERATIONAL RECORD BOOK  
463 R.A.A.F. SQUADRON  
LOSS OF LANCASTER LM 675  
BOLOGNE, FRANCE.  
17 SEPTEMBER, 1944**

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### PILOT'S REPORT

- TAKE OFF TIME: 08.15
- Sortie completed; slight haze; visibility fair; Red T/I (Target Indicator) in sight as instructed; 8,000ft; 09.15.30 hrs; 11 X 1,000 S.A.P.; USA, 4 X 1,000 GP (bomb load). Appeared to be a good concentration of bombing.
- Took off from Waddington, received hit from flak, and crew baled out. Pilot landed aircraft at Rolet south of Samer. On our bombing run, immediately after "Bombs Gone" we were hit by heavy flak, causing a hole in our port wing approximately 11ft; X 6ft; and the ailerons severely damaged. Aircraft went out of control in a diving turn; during this time No.3 tank blew out, and exploded behind aircraft.
- I ordered crew to abandon aircraft and moderate control of aircraft was maintained at 4,000 ft; during which time Wireless Operator, Mid Upper and Rear Gunners endeavoured to get out of rear door. This was jammed and the handle broke off, so had to come to the front hatch which partly jammed adding further difficulties for crew trying to bale out. Eventually all members of crew apart from Pilot squeezed themselves out.
- During this time reasonable controlled descent was maintained with port engines fully opened; starboard engines half throttled; full aileron and rudder bias.

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PILOT'S REPORT (continued)

- It is estimated crew got out at 2,000 to 3,000 ft; and at 1,500 ft; I made an effort to bale out, unsuccessfully as the aircraft dived and was uncontrollable. I regained control of the aircraft at 800 ft; and having no alternative, had to make a forced landing in the quickest possible time. Landing eventually effected in a field that was obstructed with anti-invasion posts, with my starboard engine on fire; undercarriage and flaps serviceable and operated allowing me to make a successful landing. At the end of the landing run, to avoid further damage, swung aircraft to port, coming to rest in a wood. Made a quick get away as starboard outer wing and engine were on fire.
- Throughout these extremely difficult circumstances my crew behaved in an exemplary manner and showed calm and coolness throughout.
- Navigator (F/Sgt. Dent) states:

Our pilot's captaincy and leadership displayed throughout those intense moments gave us confidence and inspiration. We considered aircraft impossible to fly, and how he effected a landing was, in the opinion of all of us, a miracle, and we never expected after we left that the aircraft would be landed.

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REAR GUNNER'S STORY

- My crew had had a busy week of Operational Flying.
- Sunday 10th; late afternoon take off target Le Havre
- Monday 11th day break take off once more Le Havre
- Monday 11th night take off target Darmstadt.
- Tuesday 12th night take off Stuttgart
- Friday 15th briefing for Brunswick, take off delayed 3 times cancelled midnight
- Saturday 16th no operations squadrons on stand down. Party night.
- Sunday 17th awoken before daylight to attend briefing.
- Boulogne to be target; German troops although surrounded were holding fast. Aim of operation was to bomb so that our forces could move in immediately and liberate the area. Briefing said there would not be any anti aircraft guns and that we would bomb at eight thousand feet and that it would just be a matter of dropping our bombs and straight home.

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REAR GUNNER'S STORY (continued)

- We were on our bombing run I heard 2 explosions near the aircraft then there was a third and I saw a blazing fuel tank pass my rear turret. The pilot ordered an immediate bale out.
- My rear turret was out of action so that I had to enter the main fuselage instead of rotating my turret to the beam and dropping out. Inside I saw the Mid Upper Gunner and Wireless Operator trying to open the rear door. So we all hastened to the front escape hatch. As I passed the astro-dome I saw a massive hole in our port wing. As we reached the front hatch we found the navigator was trapped by his parachute so he had to be helped out. It was found that the front hatch had partially jammed. Both the Mid upper Gunner and Wireless Operator had to be helped to get through the opening.
- Fortunately for me I was wearing the pilot type parachute which enabled me to lower my legs through the opening and with one hand push my parachute pack through and then drop out of the aircraft. All this time the pilot was able to maintain some control of the aircraft but great loss of height.
- I reached for the ripcord but had trouble in finding it however I must have pulled it because my chute opened and it was only a matter of less than a minute and I was on the ground.

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REAR GUNNER'S STORY (continued)2

- On the way down I was hoping to see the pilot get out instead I saw the aircraft still burning and go below some hills. In the process of baling out my very loose fitting boots had been pulled off by the slipstream it was my fortune to land in a freshly ploughed field. Within a minute or so I was picked up by some soldiers and taken to their camp and had the best cup of tea ever out of a jam tin!
- I was moved to another military camp and early in the afternoon was reunited with the navigator, bomb aimer, and flight engineer. Later we were taken to an RAF camp and there we met the pilot. (The Mid Upper Gunner still missing.) He had successfully landed the aircraft. We were then informed that the Wireless Operator was already back at Waddington! The Base Commander Air Commodore Hesketh had flown that day in his own aircraft to observe the bombing from a safe distance. When he saw that there had been some parachutes he landed somewhere nearby to see if he could pick up anybody and take them back to Waddington. In actual fact a record had been set. Shot down over France baled out and back on the Squadron not too long after the main force had returned.
- That evening in company with the Intelligence Officer we all went to the local pub (Estaminet) as soon as the locals saw us they slammed the door in our face. So we returned to the Sergeants' Mess and filled ourselves with whisky, beer was not available.

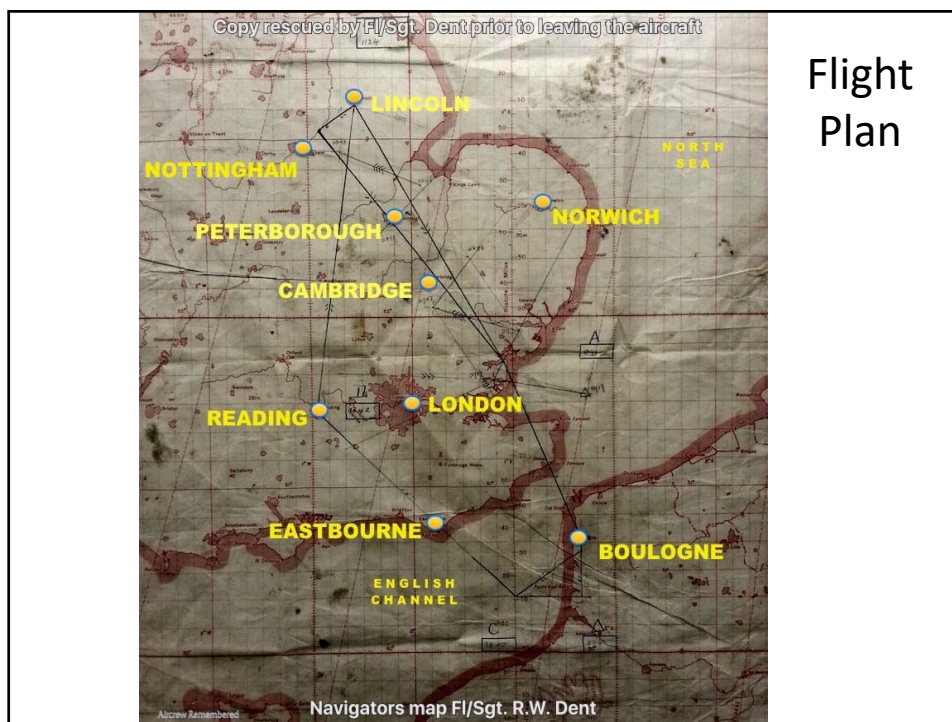
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### REAR GUNNER'S STORY (continued)

- The following day the 18th; At breakfast the Mid Upper Gunner arrived. The pilot was returned to England. We were taken to see the aircraft. The pilot had landed it wheels down on top of a hill. It seems that as soon as the aircraft came to a halt the starboard engines which had been burning fell off and rolled down the hill.
- The remainder of us returned to England the following day Tuesday 19th. Sept. We landed at Northolt. When we went to the Sergeants' Mess for lunch the Warrant Officer refused us lunch unless we paid for it. A threat by us that the matter would be reported to our Squadron Commander and he relented. We were back at Waddington late that afternoon. The amazing thing was that none of us suffered a scratch.
- An analysis for Squadron casualties was that we were the first crew to be shot down over Europe and return safely unharmed.
- There was a sequel to this in 1991. A Frenchman sent a photograph of our aircraft JOT to the English magazine "Fly Past" asking if there were any survivors. It appears that this photograph had adorned the wall of his Aunt's restaurant for many years and had been stored away in an old shoe box.

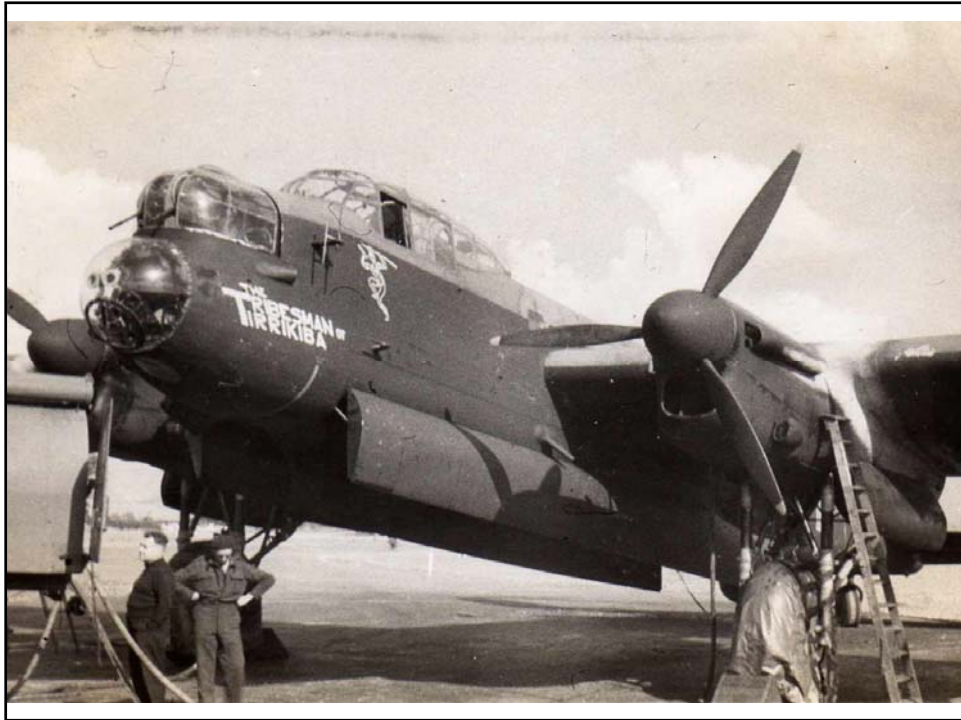


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WHERE

## **OPERATION WELLHIT**

- On the coast of Northern France, the Pas de Calais
- Close to where the English Channel is narrowest
- One of the coastal ports in the English Channel situated at the mouth of the river Liane
- Considered to be a likely point for invasion
- Most heavily fortified parts of the Atlantic Wall

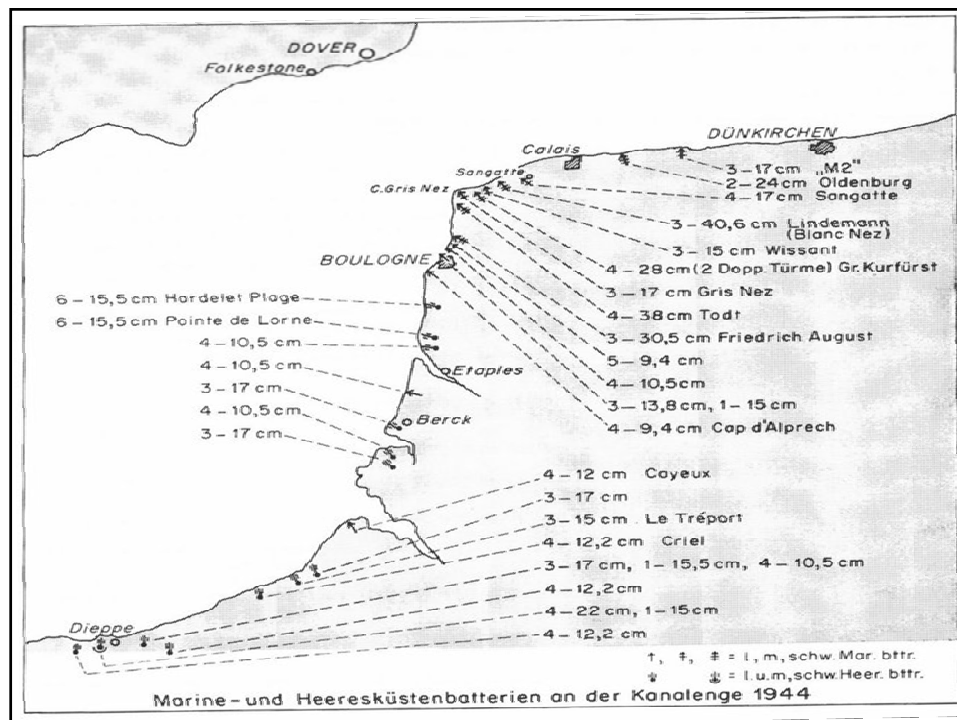
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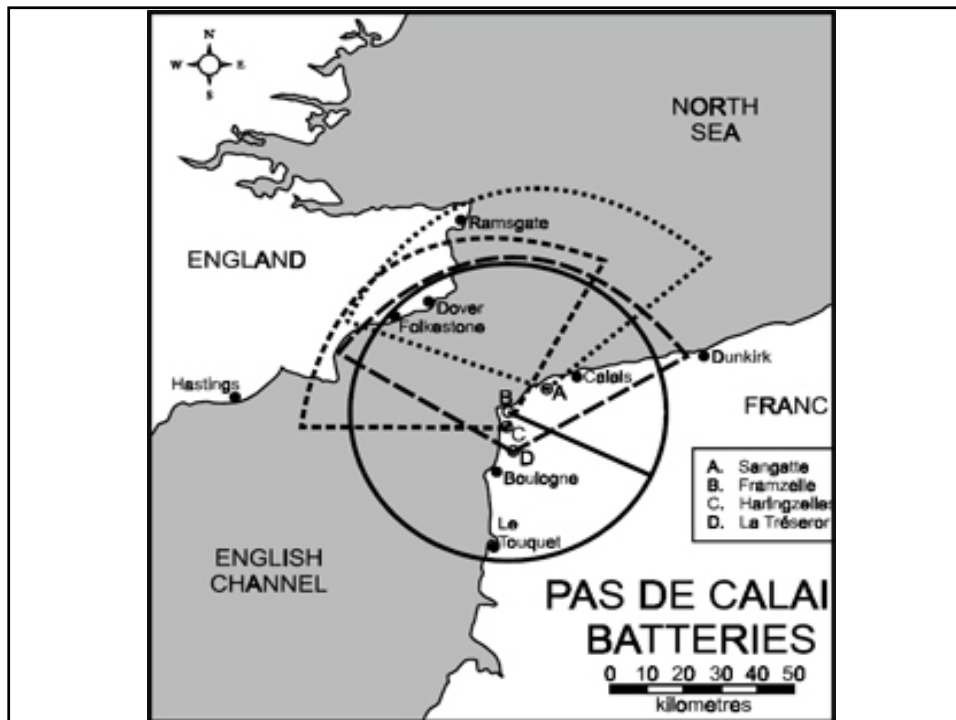
## The Atlantic Wall

- When Germany's war moved to a more defensive position, construction of an Atlantic Wall was ordered by Hitler in his Directive No 40, 23rd March 1942
- Extended down from the Cape of Norway to the Spanish border
- Over a dozen fortresses were named including the Channel ports. The instructions on the handling of these bastions came straight from Berlin in a series of decrees by the Fuhrer himself.
- After the unsuccessful raid by the Allies at Dieppe 19th August 1942, Hitler further ordered that the wall be built "*in such a way that no attack from the air the sea or the land shall appear to have any prospect of success.*"
- Manning and operation was overseen by the German Army and used French labour for construction
- Consisted of colossal coastal guns, batteries, mortars and artillery
- Heaviest fortifications were concentrated around ports. Fortifications were strongest in the Pas de Calais.
- Marshall Rommel was assigned to improve the walls defences in January 1944. Rommel determined three most probable invasion sites.
- On 4th September Hitler ordered the garrison of fortresses at Boulogne Calais and Dunkirk with both personnel and ammunition. They were "to be defended until the last man".
- Hitler believed he could halt the Allied advance by holding the forts and creating supply problems.

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## Rommel 18<sup>th</sup> April 1944



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## WHO

- Lieutenant General H D G Crerar, First CDN Army
  - Lieutenant General Guy Simonds, 2<sup>nd</sup> CDN Corps
    - Major-General Daniel Spry, 3<sup>rd</sup> CDN Inf Division
- The Canadian Army came ashore at Juno Beach and its operations were micro-managed by Field Marshall Montgomery.


"They thought of themselves as the Cinderella Army," and international correspondents agreed. This was because First Canadian Army had been relegated to the left flank of the Allied advance toward Germany from the Normandy beaches and given the tough, thankless task of opening the Channel ports from Le Havre to Ostend in Belgium. Then suddenly in early September 1944, securing these ports became an Allied priority, as this would allow Field Marshal Montgomery to drive to the Rhine with Operation Market Garden and win the war before Christmas."

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## Montgomery with the Harry Crerar




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### MONTGOMERY

"If the Canadian army was the Cinderella Army then Montgomery was the stepmother."



- Montgomery was very critical of the Canadian Army for what he perceived as a lack of speed and boldness during the landing at Normandy
- After the breakout from Normandy Montgomery favoured a Narrow front Strategy as against Eisenhower's Broad Front Strategy
- When there was a the rapid advance of 2nd British Army to Brussels, Antwerp and beyond Montgomery was further convinced that the war could be won in 1944 if absolute priority was given to his single thrust across the Rhine.
- However while the far larger Harbour of Antwerp in Belgium had been won by the British on 4th September, German control of the 80 km long Scheldt estuary denied the Allies its use.
- Also by 4<sup>th</sup> September 11 Canadian Corp and 1 British Corp had isolated the northern French ports and liberated Ostend
- The German Garrison at Dieppe withdrew before the Canadians arrived on September 1

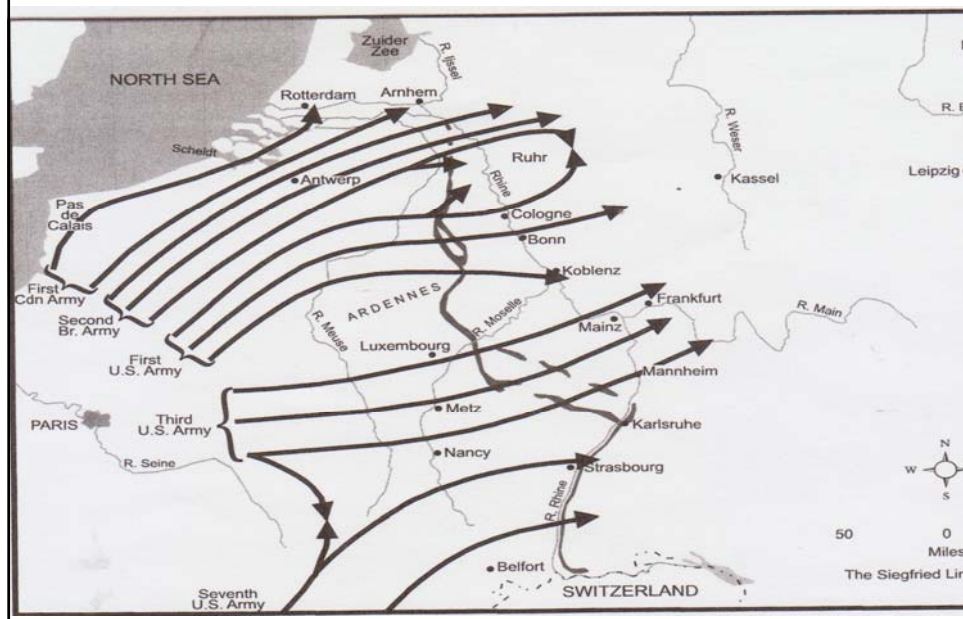
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## Montgomery's Orders

- Montgomery calculated that with the ports of Dieppe, Boulogne, Dunkirk and Calais and some help from Le Harve, he could get to Berlin before the Americans or Soviets.
- 26<sup>th</sup> August Montgomery ordered that the Canadian Army will clear the coastal belt and will remain in the general area Bruges-Calais until the maintenance situation allows.
- 6<sup>th</sup> September "Would be very grateful for your opinion on the likelihood of early capture of Boulogne. It looks as if the port of Antwerp may be unusable for some time as Germans holding islands at mouth of the Scheldt. Immediate opening of some part north of Dieppe essential for rapid development of my plan and **I want Boulogne badly**. The city should be taken at once with no regard to losses."
- 12<sup>th</sup> September Montgomery enlarged the tasks of the 1st Canadian Army by including the Scheldt/Wacheren. After Boulogne and Calais the whole energies of the Army will be directed towards the operations designed to enable full use to be made of the port of Antwerp.
- 13<sup>th</sup> September modified his orders to General Henry Crerar "Early use of Antwerp so urgent that I am prepared to give up operations against Calais and Dunkirk. Dunkirk will be left to be dealt with later. The whole energies of the Army will be directed towards operations to enable full use of the Port of Antwerp."
- 17<sup>th</sup> September 1944 Operation Market Garden was launched the same day as Operation Wellhit; Montgomery not waiting for a coastal port or the ability to use Antwerp.

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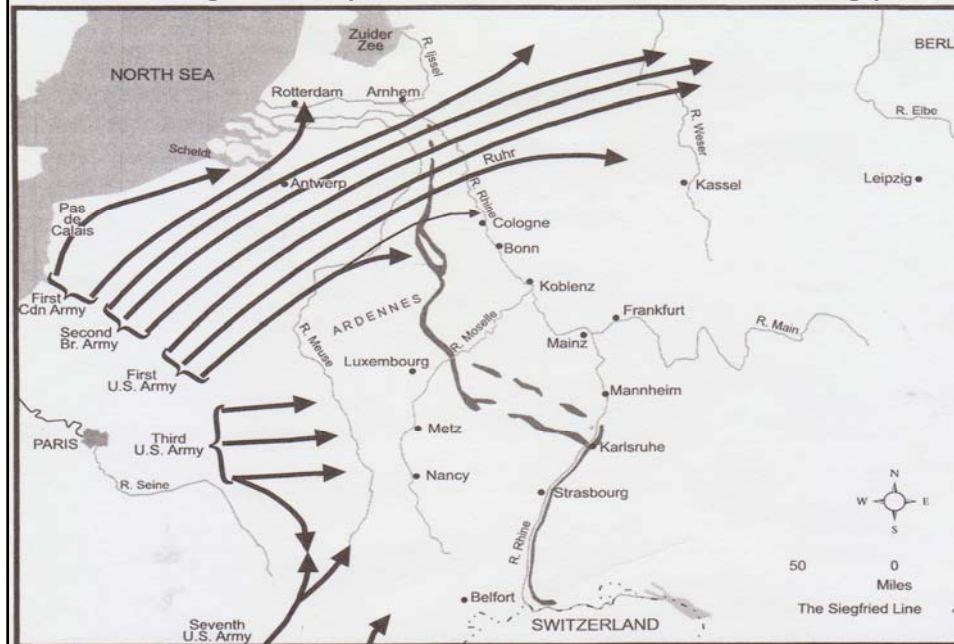
## Eisenhower's Broad Front Strategy



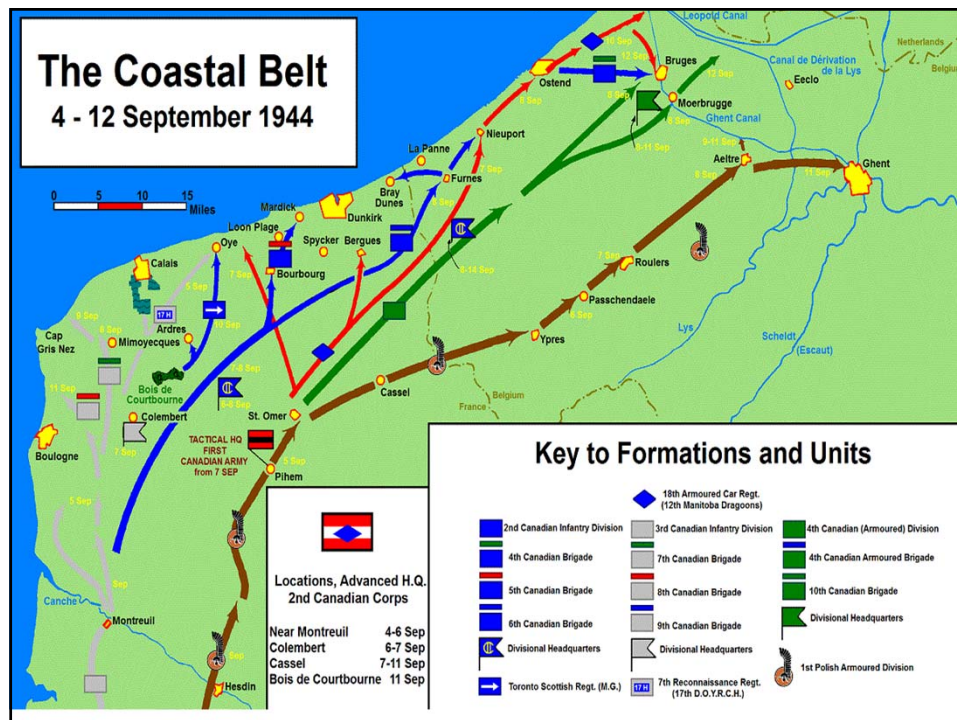
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## Montgomery's Narrow Front Strategy



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## The Defences at Boulogne

- On 5<sup>th</sup> September 7 Canadian Reconnaissance Regiment found Boulogne and Calais heavily defended. 9<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade was directed on Boulogne and the Commander thought he could take the town in his stride. The Brigade was brought to a standstill 5 miles from the city.
- Heavy coastal defences plus a semicircle (or horseshoe shape) of high ground whose natural focus is the centrally located, 170 metres high, Mont Lambert
- Mutually supporting strong points especially to the north of Boulogne.
- At one mile to the north there is a 70m high feature on which stands Fort de la Creche
- More than a mile to the south is Herqueligue 60m high.
- Perimeter and strong point defences anti tank ditches, wire obstacles, minefields, artillery positions protected by reinforced concrete bunkers
- Garrison thought to be 7,000, actual 10,000
- Garrison Commander was General Ferdinand Heim posted to Boulogne in August 1944
- Morale affected by isolation lack of escape route and awareness of the situation in France, Belgium and Holland but buoyed by the enormous strength of their defences. Had been ordered to defend to the last man.

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Looking to the  
English Channel  
from Mont  
Lambert



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## Planning (Ground Forces)

- Avoidance of use the obvious approach to Boulogne along the valley of the River Liane.
- Need to contain the adjacent northern positions of Cape Gris Nez and Calais.
- North Shore (new Brunswick) regiment had moved into position on September 6th at la Tresorerie. Had occupied an abandoned village and conducted a night attack to seize an observation post on a high hill
- Potent artillery attack help from across the Channel. The mammoth guns on the South foreland east of Dover fired on the cross-channel batteries in the Calais/Cape Gris Nez area to stop them from interfering in the attack on Boulogne. Two 14inch guns WINNIE and POOH and two 15inch came into action firing with Air Observation.
- Accurate information from French Resistance.
- Use of Auster aircraft to direct artillery. Stonks (The name "Stonk" is probably a portmanteau word for "standard concentration) and Concs (Same target) on call
- A hill south of Boulogne was designated for spectators including naval, military and air force personnel plus press correspondents, who wanted to watch 20<sup>th</sup> century siege warfare.
- Evacuation plan for civilians which happened on 10th September (8000 evacuated)

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Members of the [Maquis](#) in La Tresorerie (a hamlet part of [Wimille](#), near [Boulogne-sur-Mer](#), France), [14 September 1944](#)



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Private Joseph Chasson of the Canadian Army Film and Photo Unit speaking with refugees from Boulogne.



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## Equipment

- There was extensive use of specialised armour of the 79<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division known as “Hobart’s Funnies” - a number of unusually modified Churchill or Sherman tanks:
  - Kangaroos Infantry carriers
  - Flame Throwing Churchill Crocodiles
  - Wasp Flame throwers
  - AVRES (Assault Vehicles Royal Engineers)
  - Mine detonating flails (Tanks)
  - Tanks carrying bridging gear
  - Bunker busting Petard
- 21<sup>st</sup> Army Group’s heavy and medium artillery



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A Churchill tank leads a troop of Sherman flail tanks of British specialized 79th Armoured Division during the assault on Boulogne, September 1944



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## Kangaroo



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## Planning (Air Support)

- Air Support from Bomber Command. Would have been less except for a chance meeting with Air Chief Marshalls Tedder Harris and Leigh Mallory who  
 "agreed with little hesitation that if Boulogne and Calais were to be captured forthwith and if support was necessary then it should be given in full measure."
- Counter flak program was devised to protect aircraft of Bomber Command. Artillery fire was to be directed on the flak positions.
- Because of the number of civilian deaths and the destruction of large parts of le Harve and it was decided to limit the use of heavy bombers to Mont Lambert
- General Crerar watched from his own Auster aircraft.

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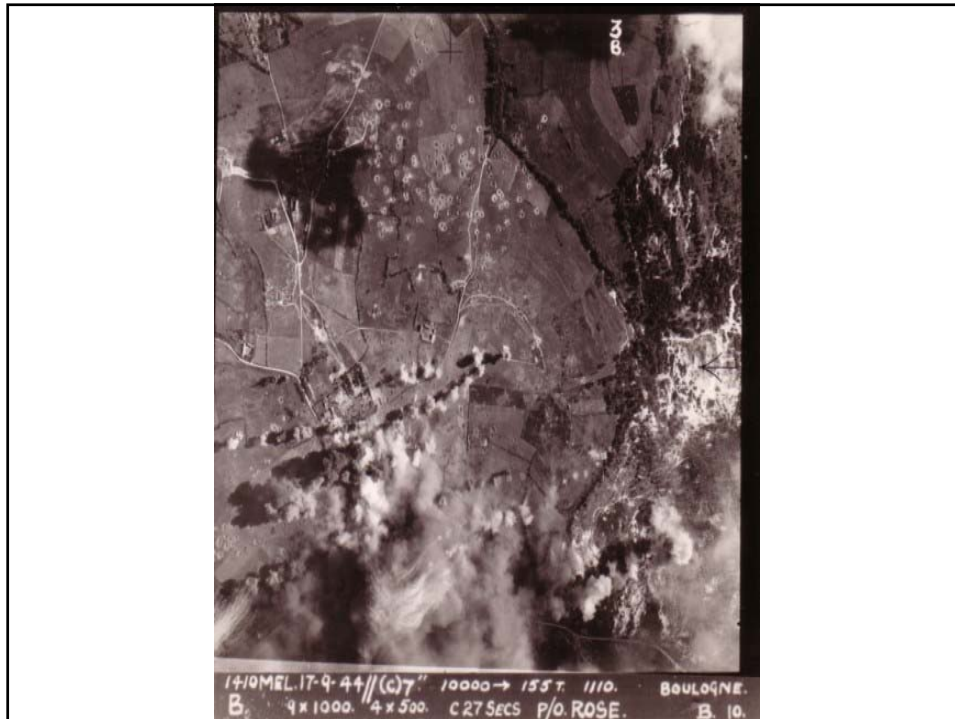
## 17th September 1944 Air Assault

- Had been delayed by weather suitable for heavy bombers and delays in the arrival of the specialised armour. It had been used in the capture of the port at Le Havre 135 miles south.
- An hour and a half of bombing starting at 0825 hours when target indicators were dropped.
- 540 Lancasters, 212 Halifaxes and 40 Mosquitoes attacked
- In spite of the artillery fire directed on the flak positions, 2 aircraft were lost - one Lancaster and one Halifax

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## Bombing of Mont Lambert as seen from observation area



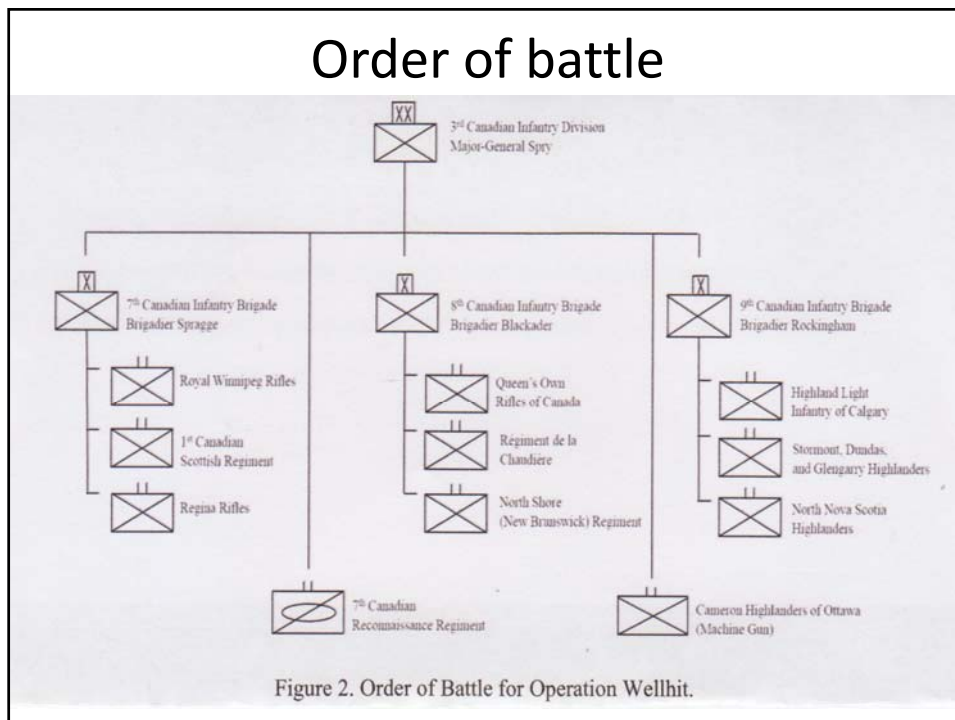
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## Land Assault

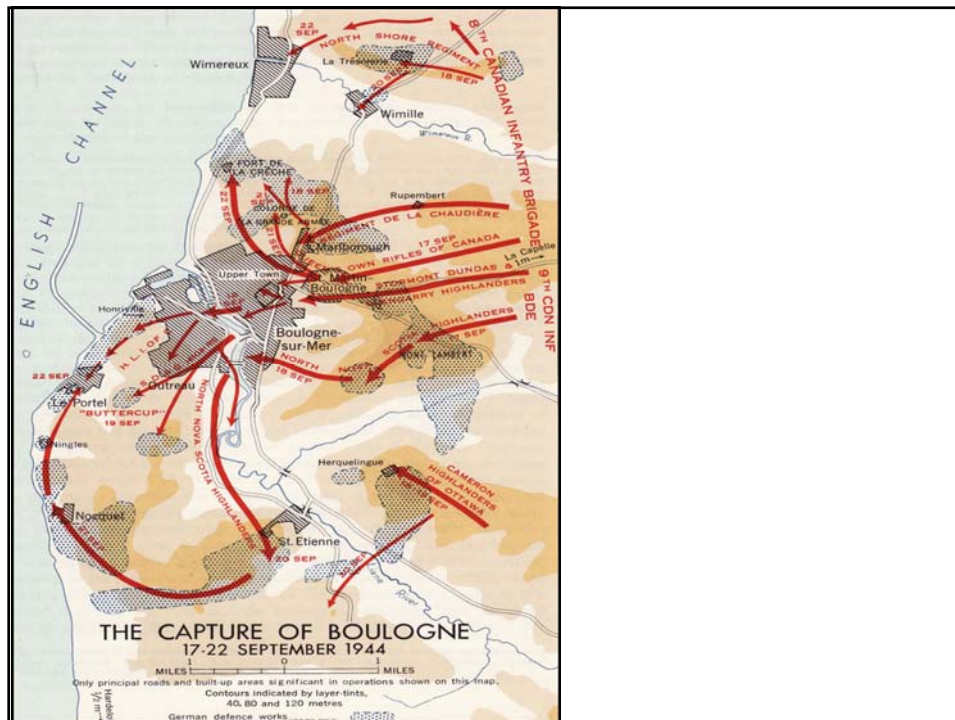
- At 0955 the main land assault began
- Organised into 4 phases
- Conducted by **two** brigades consisting of **six** regiments plus the Cameron Highlanders of Ottawa (Machine Gun battalion )
- Centre
  - Four regiments, two from each brigade led the main assault from east to west into Boulogne positioned aside the Boulogne–La Capelle Road.
  - Two were to swing north and two south and cross the river
  - A fifth (Highland Light Infantry Brigade of Calgary) acted as a reserve but was used close to the harbour
- North
  - Extreme right flank 7<sup>th</sup> Canadian Reconnaissance regiment
  - 7th Canadian Infantry Brigade attacked Cape Gris Nez
  - A Sixth regiment(North Shore) attacked La Tresorerie north of Boulogne
- South
  - Cameron Highlanders of Ottawa (Machine Gun) covered southern flank

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## Order of battle



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## Interesting Snippets

- When the Glengarry Highlanders reached the citadel (a walled part of the old city upper town) a civilian showed one of the company commanders a secret tunnel leading to the interior.
- The Glengarrians crossed the river to the south to deal with the stubborn strong points, seized the village of Outreau capturing prisoners included 30 black Senegalese complete with fez.

### The Bargain Basement Incident

- Cameron Highlanders of Ottawa successfully assaulted the high position of the very high hill at Herquelingue. The next day North Nova Scotia came under fire from the lower slopes of the feature. 400 German soldiers had hidden in underground passages while the top was occupied.

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## German Officers Surrender



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German soldiers surrendering to the 31st Field Company, Royal Canadian Engineers (R.C.E.), Boulogne, France, 18 September 1944. (Compare uniforms to other photo of surrendering German soldiers)



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Private F.J. Coakley of The North Shore Regiment sitting on a captured German coastal artillery gun, Boulogne, France, 21 September 1944.



49

Lieutenant M.G. Aubut and Private C.D. Walker of The North Shore Regiment examining a German cross-Channel gun, Sangatte, France, 26 September 1944.



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## Conclusion

- The Operation took six days instead of two days
- 600 Canadian casualties
- 9,535 German prisoners
- Did not provide the immediate relief for Montgomery's supply problems
- Calais did have to taken because the great guns would prevent use of a channel port.
- On 23rd September a port construction and repair group along with army engineers began working to clearing the debris
- By October 12 only partially opened

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## Conclusion

Mark Zuehlke *The Cinderella Campaign*

“Given only scant access to the Allied supply chain, the Canadians and their British partners in I Corps tackled the task assigned. Just getting to the ports proved a terrific undertaking fought against brutal German resistance. And once there, they faced fortresses that had been prepared for years to defeat an attack. "Lost outposts," the Allies called them, but the Germans within were not going to give up easily. And so over the month of September, the Canadians set about fighting for control of each port, scrambling for supplies while under constant military pressure to get those ports open now. For Canada this was the Cinderella Campaign, the battle for the Channel ports.”

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## YouTube

- Canadians & British capture Boulogne 1944



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## Bibliography

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